

Moving from Student Voices to Action

Insights from Practitioners at 10
California Community Colleges

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Introduction

While data on enrollment, performance, persistence, and completion can offer directional information about access and success for different student groups, they do not provide the *why* behind these measures. **Asking students directly about their experiences at the institution can help with a more comprehensive understanding of how to support their success.**

Whether your college is considering implementing student focus groups to inform your equity agenda and Guided Pathways redesign or has already held these conversations, **igniting action responsive to students' needs and perspectives requires leadership and intention.**

This brief offers insights from 10 California Community Colleges where the RP Group conducted student focus groups to support student-centered, equity-minded change (see *Learning from Students, Discovering with Colleges* below). It offers community college practitioners interested in amplifying student voices:

- **Considerations for ensuring student focus groups lead to action**
- **Ways colleges have used this type of inquiry to advance institutional change**

LEARNING FROM STUDENTS, DISCOVERING WITH COLLEGES

Over the past five years, the RP Group conducted 132 focus group sessions with 920 students at 16 California Community Colleges to inform their equity and Guided Pathways efforts. These institutions aimed to better understand what students experience as they simultaneously work toward their educational goals and navigate the complex practices and policies often found on campus—engaging students firsthand to ensure their perspectives were foundational to any redesign.

In fall 2019, the RP Group interviewed 17 faculty, staff, and administrators from 10 of these campuses, exploring how they utilized their student focus groups in their equity planning and Guided Pathways development as well as soliciting their input on how other colleges can maximize the effectiveness of this type of student inquiry in their institutional change work. This brief summarizes the results of these conversations.

See list of participating colleges on p. 12.



Ensuring Student Focus Groups Lead to Action

Student input is essential for student-centered, equity-minded change, and student focus groups are an effective way to better understand how different populations experience your institution. This type of inquiry offers one way to surface differences between what your institution intends and what students actually experience—identifying where to focus your redesign work to bridge that gap and motivating action among different campus stakeholders.

Student focus groups can result in an abundance of information, no matter what the scale of your effort. Yet, colleges sometimes find it challenging to move beyond this inquiry to act on the findings.

Practitioners participating in this research recommended dedicating time to map out a dissemination and communication plan early in the student focus group process, rather than treating engagement with the findings as an afterthought. Essential to this planning is awareness of campus culture and sensitivity to the way in which specific groups of faculty, staff, and administrators digest and react to information. As one practitioner explained:

“**[Having] an understanding of your institutional culture and key stakeholders, that’s number one. . . . Then thinking about the findings, really strategizing and anticipating how folks are going to react to this. The way the strategy comes in is thinking about where are the spaces that people come to that I can change?**”

Practitioners offered numerous suggestions for building momentum from the results using different communication and engagement strategies.



Triangulate Student Focus Group Findings with Other Evidence to Validate Student Success Issues

Practitioners emphasized that pairing student focus groups with college-wide surveys, institutional data, and/or personal experiences and anecdotes can help paint a more complete picture of the student experience. Student focus group results serve to validate issues that surfaced in the college’s quantitative data, deepen understanding about the complexity of students’ experiences, and showcase multiple angles of the same story to faculty, staff, and administrators. By engaging student voices with multiple data sources, practitioners reported that they are better able to position the college for action. One institutional researcher explained:

“For us, it was nice to have a story. It was nice to have a quote. It was nice to have a personal experience to go with all of the data we’re providing for all of these initiatives. For me, the big takeaway [is] having that qualitative data to go with the quantitative piece is a catalyst to address things across all campuses. [The college] knew we needed to [make changes], we’ve had all this data to prove we needed to [make them], and now we’re making changes....”



Segment Findings and Recommendations

Numerous practitioners highlighted the value of breaking up their comprehensive student focus group report into digestible pieces. Many specifically noted that using the report’s executive summary, or a short brief summarizing findings and recommendations, proved most effective for their college. Other approaches included annotating the report to flag which findings and recommendations were most relevant for which stakeholders as well as presenting specific results to particular audiences to focus their attention on those most connected to their work. One practitioner explained:

“Share what is relevant to the people you are presenting the findings and recommendations [to] to enable them to take action. If you’re discussing [the findings] and most of your workshop participants are from the student service areas, they may not be particularly interested in what’s happening on the instructional side.... Keep your presentations [focused] on what we’re going to do about it and how they can be engaged instead of just let me power through this 50-page report.”



Work through College Decision-Making Structures

Once segmented, practitioners described a range of ways to connect student focus group results with associated stakeholders. They spoke about taking advantage of existing structures and processes to increase the likelihood that constituent groups, influencers, and decision-makers learn about the student perspectives and experiences surfaced. One practitioner advised:

“Roll it out through your participatory governance and structural process to various units, departments, committees, and ask people to use the information [and] to connect it to their planning efforts.”



Support Meaning-Making

Practitioners emphasized the need to assist different stakeholders in understanding the implications of the results. Practitioners acknowledged that student focus

groups can generate sometimes sensitive and troubling findings that might put their colleagues on the defensive, putting productive dialog—let alone action—at risk.

Multiple practitioners suggest engaging an outside facilitator who can guide structured conversations about student focus group results with different groups—serving as an active listener, bringing an objective perspective, and helping “unstick” difficult conversations. One practitioner also noted the value of establishing common agreements before diving into analysis and application of student focus group results to promote productive discussions, stating:

“When we start getting into real conversations around equity... we have to be willing to look at the data and not automatically throw up our hands and say [the data are] completely invalid because there’s this issue with the methodology, there wasn’t a 40% response rate, or there’s not enough students in the [focus groups]. We should never invalidate students’ experience, even if this only applies to the 50 students that came into these focus groups. It’s still their experiences, and it’s sobering when you look at the feedback. That’s something that we have to get our college to be okay with.... I want to build more of a coalition around receiving those results as opposed to getting reactions that can derail committee meetings. We need to have an agreement and ground rules as a college.



Structure Planning and Accountability

Many practitioners acknowledged the challenge of moving beyond active discussion and analysis of student focus group findings, recommendations, and implications, and wished they had done more in retrospect to push stakeholders to identify specific priorities and action plans to which they could hold themselves accountable. Practitioners described running out of time in their conversations and feeling persistently overwhelmed with the volume of possibilities generated by both the student voices activities and the subsequent dialog.

Practitioners suggested narrowing down and picking a few recommendations and assigning clear activities, deadlines, and leads to in order to set priorities and generate momentum. One practitioner reflected:

“We can’t do all 16 [recommendations], but which ones do we want to say are a priority for our college? Let’s pick three or five. Then what are some potential actions that we can take? Set some kind of deadline and some kind of prioritization because it’s just overwhelming when you get so many things to work on. The other conversation we had is how do [these recommendations] align to other things that we’re doing on campus? We could have mapped out where these things fit in to work that’s already been done. Maybe we’re already working on several of these already, and we didn’t even know.



Continue Fostering Student Engagement after Focus Groups

Several colleges emphasized that student focus groups were just a beginning—reinforcing the need for and commitment to including student voices in redesign efforts. Over half of the colleges interviewed reported that the student focus group findings initiated a shift in college-wide conversations about the value of student perspectives to informing policy and practice. One interviewee described:

“For me, [it was] to just realize the power of having student focus groups. Even though it wasn’t directly the findings of the focus group, but just the fact that we had done a focus group led to more momentum in engaging students and engaging other people because it’s very powerful. And so, we are trying to bring in more... student voices.

Colleges offered a number of ways they used this first effort to generate additional opportunities for students to share their experiences and perspectives. In some cases, colleges built on the momentum generated by their focus groups to begin bringing students to the table as design partners. Examples included:

- Conducting student panels during presentations and convocations
- Gathering feedback directly from student workers such as tutors and student ambassadors
- Implementing marketing campaigns to reinforce the commitment to change through student voices
- Proactively outreaching to a wide range of students (not just those in formal leadership roles) to join shared governance committees



Recognize Additional Student Engagement Requires Intentional Structure and Support

At the same time, practitioners acknowledged that gathering student input on their experiences at the college and including students in decision-making requires active planning and deliberate support. Yet, colleges are on a continuum in terms of equipping students for full participation, particularly in the shared governance process. Practitioners described prior efforts to include students in governance as typically involving one or two “token” Associated Student Government members on committees—students who have not been well prepared to serve as equal contributors. Practitioners reported a growing awareness among college leaders that students need training on how the California Community Colleges shared governance system works to enable meaningful engagement. Moreover, practitioners noted more proactive efforts by their colleges to reach out to and include student populations that have not typically had a voice in the decision-making process on issues of equity and student success.¹

1 Find design principles for meaningful student involvement in institutional redesign in [Student Engagement in Guided Pathways Development](#).



Advancing Institutional Change with Student Focus Group Results

Practitioners underscored the power of student voices to spark new efforts or increase the momentum for changes that previously struggled to gain traction, as one person noted:

“We were able to leverage the focus groups to take some action that we hadn’t been able to do with other data.”

Colleges shared a myriad of ways that student focus group findings and recommendations—coupled with the subsequent dialog and action planning—facilitated improvements in their students’ experience and informed other institutional efforts, such as planning and hiring. We offer a sampling of these changes below as well as spotlight the work of Grossmont College, which utilized their student voices effort to motivate significant culture and systems changes (see College Spotlight, p. 9).



Recognize Improving the Student Experience

While student focus groups surfaced unique considerations at each college and for specific populations, they also identified common issues, regardless of the campus. Examples included:

- Varying levels of academic and social engagement inside and outside the classroom
- Inconsistent experiences with counseling and advising
- High cost of textbooks
- Limited knowledge and access to academic and student supports
- Challenges related to financial aid policies
- Concerns with course scheduling and availability
- Transportation issues

Practitioners described numerous programmatic, process, and policy responses these realizations spurred, including the following examples.

“I would say probably the greatest success [that came] out of [the focus groups] is our Umoja... space. When I read the quotes from the focus groups, and then said, “81% of our new African-American students are not served by any special program,” no one had a response. The room was silent, and that was it, and then [the space] was approved. Something that had taken us more than three years to get done, was done in that moment. I don’t know if I could have made the compelling argument. I just cited quotes from the focus group. I think that was powerful in a way that probably we didn’t expect it to be. It went much further than all the quantitative data that we had.”

“We realized that students were responding and saying that they didn’t know services existed until the end of their first year. The biggest push, however, was when other students mentioned not knowing where services were until their second year.... The response when the information was disseminated to our governance counsel helped us coalesce support for the equity efforts. The college focused on ensuring [equity-related] programs really received an allocation of funding to look at these issues, the concerns, and the experiences that students had expressed in the focus groups.

“In the focus groups, as well as in some surveys, we’ve [identified] the need for extended hours and evening hours. There was some restructuring in Student Services, and we’re now open until 7:00 pm a couple nights a week and one Saturday a month. They’re also adding library hours.

“One of the recommendations was to connect students early with faculty and to their career [or area of interest]. We took that, and we redesigned our orientation. It used to be just Student Services.... This fall, we actually had a huge faculty and academic component, where we involved Academic Affairs and brought in industry. We grouped students by their area of interest and actually paired them with a [faculty member and industry representative].... That was a huge shift for the college.

“We’ve renewed our commitment to offering more campus life activities. One of the focus group findings was [students] were not feeling engaged or vested on campus from their instructors or the campus life activities.

COLLEGE SPOTLIGHT:

Grossmont College — Changing the Timeline for Financial Aid Disbursement to Meet Students’ Basic Needs

Although the RP Group conducted no specific focus group for students with low incomes, “low-income” was indeed a characteristic with which students in all of the focus groups identified. Students discussed the myriad ways financial challenges affected their attendance, and in turn, their academic performance. Even when students received Board of Governors’ waivers and other financial aid, they still struggled to meet both large expenses (e.g., textbooks) and seemingly small costs (e.g., transportation, parking). Instead of alleviating some of the financial pressures faced by students with low incomes, the timeline for financial aid disbursement—a systemic issue at most colleges—often exacerbates it. The disbursement of financial aid typically takes place weeks into the semester, thus limiting the ability of students experiencing financial hardship to buy essential course materials and pay for other necessities that enable them to get off to a successful start.

Revising financial aid disbursement timelines is no small feat as financial aid offices often resist amending the traditional schedule. Grossmont already knew about the barriers disbursement timelines posed for students and was trying to make commensurate changes. However, the perspectives students shared in the focus groups were a critical catalyst, helping to generate the urgency needed to inspire the college’s financial aid team to embrace this student-centered change, which also has clear equity implications. Now, the college disburses some aid the Friday before the start of the semester, including federal Pell and Supplemental Educational Opportunity grants as well as scholarships, providing much appreciated assistance when they need it.



Inform Institutional Planning and Hiring

Colleges also described applying their student focus group results to other organizational planning efforts including integrating findings into grant proposals to make the case for funding, using them in program reviews, and identifying areas of professional development. In some cases, colleges leveraged results to advocate for more staffing capacity, increase the sense of urgency to hire for positions previously unfilled, or inform changes to existing roles, as described by three practitioners:

“The hiring of the position for equity and the undocumented student coordinator seemed like it was a lot more urgent as a result of the focus group outcomes... We did not have an Office of Student Equity and we didn’t have an AB 540 coordinator; those were realized outcomes from the focus group effort.

“Students mentioned having trouble with Canvas because [Canvas shells] were not consistent [across courses]. The information from the focus groups was used in our faculty prioritization process to make the case for an instructional designer for online students. We now have a staff position that will work with faculty so that from the students’ perspective, all Canvas shells have the same look and feel no matter what course they are in.

“Language was one of the issues that came up in terms of things being equitable and students having access [to financial aid services]. The financial aid [office] made some changes in their operations and how [staff] interact with students. They’ve done some work in terms of having staff that can speak multiple languages.

Advancing Your Own Student Focus Group Effort

Student focus groups can inform and drive student-centered, equity-minded change. Whether your college is considering efforts to collect student voices or is building a practice of engaging students in your redesign efforts, these practitioner insights can help ensure that your college honors the perspectives and experiences of your students with meaningful action.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Get Started...Collecting Student Voices offers five key steps for systematically listening to students and discussion prompts to jumpstart your own effort.

Students Shaping Change: Engaging Students as Essential Partners in Guided Pathways Development summarizes six principles for meaningful student involvement in institutional design and decision-making, examples from Santa Monica College's Student Advisory Squad, and an exercise to advance your approach.

The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges

The RP Group strengthens the ability of California Community Colleges to discover and undertake high-quality research, planning, and assessments that improve evidence-based decision-making, institutional effectiveness, and success for all students.

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Colleges Conducting Student Focus Groups with the RP Group

Allan Hancock College*

Cabrillo College*

City College of San Francisco

Cuesta College*

Cuyamaca College*

Fresno City College

Grossmont College*

Hartnell College

Lake Tahoe Community College*

Los Angeles Valley College*

Monterey Peninsula College

Mt. San Jacinto College*

Ohlone College*

Reedley College

Riverside City College

Yuba College

**Colleges participating in fall 2019 interviews with the RP Group*